



Cancer patients focus on strengths

Survivors, families put their minds to health

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Catherine Prevost hopped a flight from California and donned her irreverent pink "Cancer Sucks" T-shirt to attend her sixth Cancer as a Turning Point conference at Furman University this weekend.

"I walk in and feel like I have just been embraced," said Prevost, an 11-year survivor of breast cancer. "It's very spiritual."

"I didn't know quite what to expect," said Jo Smith, an Atlanta-area friend and colon cancer survivor whom Prevost persuaded to attend. "But one of the things that really hit me is you're just kind of touched by all the warmth."

The two women were among about 800 people from all over the country who came to share an experience and hear positive messages about living with cancer at the two-day conference.



Stretching themselves: Audience members participate in a yoga exercise during the Cancer as a Turning Point conference Saturday at Furman's McAlister Auditorium. ALAN DEVORSEY/Staff

James Kepley drove 41/2 hours from Tennessee with his wife, who was diagnosed four years ago with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma less than a decade after their daughter died of a brain tumor.

"Caregivers go through everything the patient goes through psychologically," he said. "This has been wonderful, associating with other families and meeting other caregivers in the same situation."

Sponsored by Cancer Centers of the Carolinas and Bon Secours St. Francis Health System, the event, held for the second time in Greenville, aims to offer inspiration as well as techniques for dealing with a life-threatening disease.

Dr. Martin L. Rossman, director of The Healing Mind, a resource center for self-healing in Greenbrae, Calif., for instance, spoke of fighting cancer from within.

"The body always tries to do what the head asks it to do," he said. "So it's important not to let your mind get taken over by your fears."

Skills such as relaxation and guided imagery, along with setting a goal of surviving, have been proven to reduce anxiety, depression and even the adverse effects of cancer treatments while stimulating the body's immune response, Rossman said.

"There's a lot more to cancer treatments than simply medical treatments," he said. "People who get interested in supporting their health do better. They are healthier through treatment, suffer less adverse effects and there's even reason to think they survive longer.

"It makes the journey very, very different."

Minister Wayne Muller, author of "Legacy of the Heart," provided a few lighter, yet still inspirational, moments.

After he was diagnosed with a serious heart condition, Muller said, he compiled a list of what he hated about his life and took it to his therapist.

"I'm too weak, I should be stronger, I'm old, fat and not attractive anymore, and he said, 'Yes, that's all true,'" he told the laughing crowd. "But then he said, other things are also true. You are compassionate, wise, courageous, gentle."

Focusing on that, he said, helped him through.

The event also featured healthy eating tips from nutritionist Liz Lipski and performances by professional dancer Suzanne Grace, soul singer Sista Monica Parker, and Jonna Tamases with her one-woman show.

Along with information for cancer survivors and their families, the conference offered lessons for health-care professionals as well.

"I've gotten a lot of good information," said Michele de Candio, an oncology nurse from Charleston. "Taking care of emotional health is very important."

For Hope Murtaugh of Greer, who was diagnosed with breast cancer four years ago, the conference focuses on needs that aren't typically addressed by conventional medicine.

"Treatment of a serious disease is always physical," she said. "But the reality of it is it's an emotional experience, and for many people, a spiritual experience, one that goes beyond the physical.

"This is a chance to acknowledge that. That what I am isn't just this body."